

Town Government Study Committee 2014

Town Hall, Great Hall

July 23, 2014

Committee members present: Chair Katherine L. Babson, Jr., Vice Chair Rose Mary Donahue, Stanley Brooks, Ann Marie Gross, Richard Page, Anna Sereiko, Thomas Ulfelder, Arthur Goldberg

Absent: Linda Perlmutter

List of documents used at the meeting:

1. Chart submitted by Hans Larsen with information about the towns of Templeton, Wellesley, Wayland, Charlton, Hanson, Sutton, Dedham, Danvers, Ipswich, Reading, Hingham and Westborough (one page)
2. List submitted by Chair Babson with list of committees and departments to meet with (two pages)

Chair Babson called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. She announced that the meeting was being televised by Wellesley Cable, and requested that Committee members identify themselves the first time they spoke during the meeting. Mr. Goldberg was appointed Acting Secretary for the purposes of keeping the minutes of the meeting.

No one was present to address the Committee during Citizens' Speak.

Upon motion of Vice Chair Donahue, duly seconded, the minutes of the July 9 meeting were unanimously approved, subject to minor typographical corrections.

Wellesley's Executive Director Hans Larsen was present at the Committee's invitation to present his views about Town government. Selectwoman Barbara Searle was present for this portion of the meeting, but did not speak. Prior to the meeting, Chair Babson had sent Mr. Larsen the Committee's draft set of standard questions to orient him to the Committee's primary areas of concern prior to his appearance at the meeting.

Mr. Larsen stated that he is a member of the Massachusetts Municipal Managers Association, which is an off-shoot of the Massachusetts Municipal Association. Mr. Larsen is a member of the Form of Government Committee of the MMMA. The FOG Committee consults with towns concerning the various attributes of different forms of local government—what works well and what doesn't. He was once a chair of the FOG Committee.

Mr. Larsen distributed a one-page table to the Committee members created by the FOG Committee. The table provided information about the towns of Templeton, Wellesley, Wayland, Charlton, Hanson, Sutton, Dedham, Danvers, Ipswich, Reading, Hingham and Westborough. The table showed for each town, the population, basis of town government (by-laws or charter), whether the town has an open or representative town meeting, whether the town has a town administrator, town manager or executive

director (only Wellesley has an exec. dir.), whether town boards and committees are elected or appointed (and if appointed, by whom), who is the appointing authority for certain department head positions, who performs collective bargaining for the town, who prepares town budgets, and who approves warrants. The towns of Wayland, Charlton and Hanson were described as good examples of a “Weak” town administrator form of government, Sutton and Dedham were good examples of “Strong” town administrator forms of government (although since the table was created, Mr. Larsen stated that Dedham has switched to a town manager), and Danvers, Ipswich and Reading were good examples of town manager forms of government, moreso than the town managers and town administrators in the other communities studied.

Ms. Gross asked Mr. Larsen how information similar to that in the table presented could be gathered for additional communities. Mr. Larsen said that it would be necessary to research the by-laws of other communities.

Mr. Larsen also referred to a chart of town powers that had been distributed to Committee members at a prior meeting. In response to a question from Mr. Brooks, Mr. Larsen stated that Wellesley’s government structure, with its 5-member Board of Selectmen and representative town meeting, was left of center (more decentralized) on the spectrum on the chart that ranged from most decentralized government to most centralized.

Chair Babson then asked Mr. Larsen to talk about his position of Executive Director. Mr. Larsen stated that the Executive Director does not have much formal authority, and that he has found some significant shortcomings in the functioning of Wellesley’s government. He stated that Wellesley government is the sum of independent parts, instead of an integrated entity. Budgeting is done by each board or department. Wellesley is on the opposite end of the spectrum from a well-run company, because a company can make decisions to cut or expand certain areas in particular parts of the company based on a strategy to benefit the company as a whole. Neither the Executive Director nor the Board of Selectmen has the power to tell boards or departments how to set their budgets, or to tell them what to do.

Chair Babson noted that the BOS has the power to decide whether or not a tax override vote will be put on the town-wide ballot, and can influence departmental budgets through that power (although they have never done so). Mr. Larsen agreed but said that there is no entity in town with the power to shift priorities from one department to another. Mr. Brooks asked how the town could move in that direction. Mr. Larsen stated that the town has had a history of raising taxes to maintain town services, instead of requiring a more centralized budget authority empowered to enforce fiscal discipline. As an affluent community, Wellesley does not look for cost savings aggressively. No board or department will independently propose cutting its own budget for the good of other boards or departments. If budgets are proposed by boards in excess of the budget guideline, overrides have been passed to pay for them. Ms. Gross asked what gets in the way of Wellesley having a town-wide strategic plan. Mr. Larsen said that there is nobody with the power to implement it.

Mr. Page asked about the issue of frequent turn-over in the membership of elected bodies. Mr. Larsen agreed that this was a negative factor. He cited the example of the membership of Advisory examining the budget every year. Because the Advisory members serve a three year term, that means that 2/3ds of Advisory is comprised of newly appointed members plus members who have served for about one year. That means that Advisory members scrutinizing the budget are not very experienced with Wellesley government typically. Mr. Larsen suggested that longer terms for Advisory members and having fewer members (perhaps 7) would help erase the learning curve issue and result in more efficient work by more experienced members.

Ms. Sereiko asked how towns with administrators or managers deal with the school budget. Mr. Larsen said the biggest difference between those towns and Wellesley is that a maximum can be set for the schools to work within in terms of available funds.

Mr. Larsen stated that if Wellesley residents understood how their town government worked, they would be disappointed.

Mr. Larsen stated that, for example, in Reading, it is the town manager's budget that is created by the town manager and presented for approval by him. A town manager has more control over the budget in part because the departments creating the budget components work for the town manager.

Mr. Larsen commented that annual town meeting lasts longer in Wellesley than in most other towns.

Mr. Brooks asked whether giving more authority to the Board of Selectmen would address some of these issues. Chair Babson said that in the late 1980s, Town Meeting approved the Board of Selectmen having more authority over various budgets (of 6 boards). The measure passed by one vote and then 4 years later Town Meeting undid that.

Mr. Larsen noted that usually when towns have changed their structure (for example Weston and Templeton), they have been moving toward more centralized power. The trend is toward more centralized management and toward more professional administration. Giving more executive authority to full-time professionals allows the boards of selectmen and other elected part-time officials to focus more on making policy decisions. The Form of Government Committee advocates for more professional management.

Mr. Ulfelder asked about potential areas of consolidation. Mr. Larsen said the often cited example of redundant Information Technology personnel is not a good example because IT functions have been consolidated, except that the town services IT people and the School Department IT people remain separate. Mr. Larsen stated that potential consolidation opportunities exist in the finance functions because there are 3—one each for the School Department, the Department of Public Works, and the other town departments. Also, there are separate Human Resources departments—one for the School Department and one for the rest of Town government. Mr. Larsen said that the difficulty with consolidating is that that goes against the autonomy that elected boards prefer.

Mr. Larsen stated that Wellesley would look different if it had not passed a number of overrides in past years. Many other towns have not passed overrides.

Mr. Larsen stated that Wellesley could cut costs in many ways that would not negatively impact services.

Vice Chair Donahue stated that the town's long term budget planning has improved during Mr. Larsen's time as Executive Director.

Vice Chair Donahue asked Mr. Larsen for specific changes to town government that he recommends. Mr. Larsen stated that there were some things he would not mention, but that he recommends the addition of more in-house financial analysis personnel, that the Executive Director be given more authority, that the annual performance rating of department heads not be done only by the board members to whom they provide support (too many are given the top rating of 5). Vice Chair Donahue asked in what ways the Town could provide better services to residents. Mr. Larsen said that the receptionists and administrative staff for the several small departments in the basement of Town Hall could be consolidated for better resident service, and that perhaps the Town could use more private contractors to plow snow off the roads as opposed to employees.

Mr. Ulfelder asked about the School Department budget. Mr. Larsen said that the School Department budget office is understaffed. They need more employees working on that budget. Mr. Larsen also mentioned that the Department of Public Works does not need more financial analysis, it needs more financial transparency. The DPW budget is too complicated. The DPW needs to focus less on its budget and more on operations.

Chair Babson said that Wellesley's form of government engenders broad citizen participation. She asked whether centralizing powers would take away from that. Mr. Larsen stated that much time is wasted on talking about subjects that new citizen volunteers do not understand. This results in actions be taken very slowly, which disserves residents.

Mr. Goldberg asked about what changes might be made to better serve the Wellesley business community. Mr. Larsen stated that the Board of Selectmen has reached out to businesses, and that the introduction of liquor licensing in town is an example. Mr. Larsen stated that permitting is very slow and that it would help businesses if applications could be turned around quicker, if there were fewer application approvals required, and if the town was less bureaucratic overall. He stated that centralization of power would be a benefit because there is no one in a position to assess the overall businessperson's or resident's experiences in their interactions with town officials. Mr. Larsen stated that he is not specifically advocating for the town manager position for Wellesley.

Mr. Larsen thinks that the Facilities Management Department and Permanent Building Committee should communicate better, so that the FMD can provide practical feedback to the PBC. However, he does not think it would be fair to ask the PBC volunteers to supervise the full-time FMD staff.

Mr. Larsen will contact Chair Babson with some recommendations as to who in other towns would be good sources of information on governance issues.

The Committee thanked Mr. Larsen for his candid insights and his time.

The Committee moved on to other business.

Chair Babson proposed adding one more question to the list of questions previously discussed by the Committee for sending to other boards. The question was: what specific suggestions for improvements to Town government do you have? Ms. Gross will add the question to the list and circulate the updated questions to the Committee.

Chair Babson stated that requiring boards and staff to provide the Committee with written answers to the Committee's questions would be too much work for the boards and staff, and counter-productive to the Committee's desire to hear debate among board members about the issues raised by the questions. Chair Babson suggested that the written questions be given in advance to those boards and department staff before they speak with the full Committee or with Committee members in small groups, but that written responses not be requested. The Committee agreed.

The Committee agreed that only certain larger boards would be asked to speak to the full Committee. Otherwise, one, two, or three Committee members will go to other boards and departments to discuss our Committee's questions with them. The Committee does not want boards or staff making Powerpoint presentations; we want to speak with them. Chair Babson suggested that when Committee members are going to board meetings, that 30-45 minutes of time be requested. When Committee members speak to boards and staff, Committee members will then prepare written summaries of the discussion to share with the full Committee. Chair Babson will arrange the meetings for those boards coming to a full Committee meeting. Chair Babson will send a communication to all boards and staff to whom the Committee wishes to speak stating that they will be hearing from Committee members in the near future.

Chair Babson distributed a two-page chart listing committees and departments to whom the Committee would speak. It was agreed (subject to future modification as the Committee might determine) that the full Committee would meet with: the Board of Selectmen; the Advisory Committee and former Advisory Committee chairs; the School Committee; former Moderators; Town Meeting Members; Town residents; the Board of Public Works and Municipal Light Plant Board together; and the Board of Health, Council on Aging, Youth Commission, and Veterans' Services together.

Vice Chair Donahue, Mr. Brooks, and Mr. Ulfelder will meet with the Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, Building Department, Wetlands Protection Committee and Design Review Board, as well as Planning Department staff, developers and landowners. Ms. Gross and Ms. Sereiko will meet with the Permanent Building Committee, Audit Committee, Board of Assessors, Facilities Maintenance Department, as well as Assessors' Office staff and FMD staff. Ms. Perlmutter and Mr. Goldberg will meet with Human Resources, as well as the current and former HR Directors. Mr. Ulfelder will meet with the Retirement Board. Chair Babson will meet with the Sustainable Energy Committee and the Trails Committee. Mr. Page and Mr. Brooks will meet with the Library Trustees and with Library staff (Mr. Brooks to organize the meeting). Vice Chair Donahue will meet with the Community Preservation Committee, the Historical Commission, and the Historic District Commission. Chair Babson and Ms.

Gross will meet with the Natural Resources Commission. Mr. Page will meet with the Playing Fields Task Force. Mr. Goldberg will meet with Recreation, the Housing Authority, the Wellesley Housing Development Corporation, and the Fair Housing Committee. Ms. Sereiko and Mr. Page will meet with Public Works staff (Mr. Page to organize the meeting). Ms. Sereiko, Mr. Ulfelder and Mr. Page will meet with the School Department staff (Ms. Sereiko to organize the meeting). Mr. Page and Ms. Sereiko will meet with MLP staff (Mr. Page to organize the meeting). Chair Babson, Ms. Gross and Mr. Goldberg will meet with Finance Department staff and the Treasurer/Collector (Ms. Gross to organize the meeting). Chair Babson and Mr. Ulfelder will meet with the Fire Department and Police Department chiefs (Chair Babson to organize the meeting). Vice Chair Donahue and Mr. Page will meet with Information Technology staff (Mr. Page to organize the meeting). Chair Babson will coordinate a meeting with the Chamber of Commerce/Business Community.

The meetings with one, two, or three Committee members will begin as soon as possible.

The Committee discussed the use of a survey to gather information. A survey to Town Meeting Members would probably be different than the survey to residents. Ms. Gross stated that the town of Concord recently completed a resident survey and it would be helpful for the Committee to see what questions were asked.

The Committee meeting of August 6, 2014 was cancelled due to the unavailability of several members. The next full Committee meeting will be on August 27, 2014 in the Great Hall in Town Hall.

Chair Babson adjourned the meeting at approximately 10:30 p.m.